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SOUL REAVER 2

Raziel's cliffhanger concludes on the Dreamcast and PlayStation2

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To Be Kaintinued...

Raziel's cliffhanger concludes next March, when Soul Reaver 2 descends on the Dreamcast and — surprise! — PlayStation 2

by Crispin Boyer

Amazon.com boxes litter Crystal Dynamics offices in Menlo Park, Calif., just south of San Francisco. They're piled in corners. They jut from trash cans. And you'll find the books that came in them—glossy paperbacks about architecture, philosophy, art, religion—stacked to near tumbling on every desk and work table. The Soul Reaver 2 team, which is comprised of nearly all the same folks who worked on the last game, is neck deep in research again, expanding on one of the richest universes in gaming. Both 1996's Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain and last year's Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver spun gothic stories steeped in philosophy and mythology (betcha didn't know Raziel's name means "secret of god," according to angelology).

But there's one myth Amy Hennig, director of both SR and SR2, would like to see die a quick, nasty death. "People assume that this sequel is just the stuff we cut from Soul Reaver, and it's not," said Hennig, whose first task when she started at Crystal in '95 was to work with developer Silicon Knights on the original Blood Omen. "I guess the comparison here would be between The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi, in that we had a cliffhanger, and now we have a new story that's not just another 20 minutes. It's like a whole other movie."
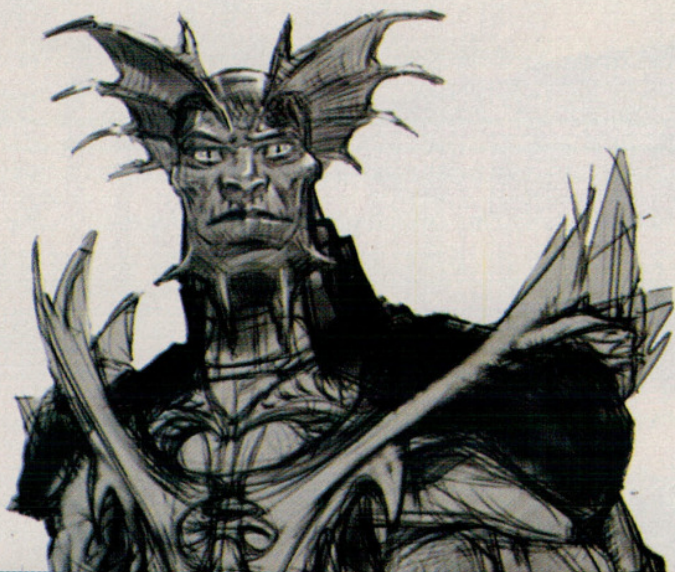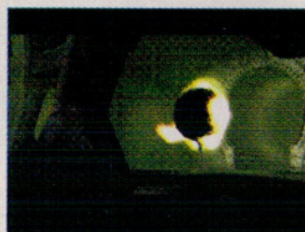
Players who beat SR remember—and probably even griped about—its abrupt to-be-continued finale, which saw Raziel stalk after Kain into a star-swirling time vortex. Some gamers even cried conspiracy. After uncovering dialog sequences on the game's CD that they never heard during Raziel's adventure, cynics figured publisher Eidos and Crystal slapped an ending onto the already late SR and shipped it half finished. Lack of story development for the vampire lieutenant Turel supported that theory.

The truth isn't so sinister. "The stuff we cut was the equivalent of the Silenced Cathedral level from Soul Reaver," Hennig said. "It would have been nice to keep that in, and all the denouement and character resolution, but there was just no time....We couldn't spend five years making that game. It was just as well to do it in two parts. I just wish we had planned that from the start and had a more elegant cliffhanger. That's the only thing I regret. But for all those people who like to pick apart all the game's audio files and try to deduce what we were trying to do with the story, they'll be disappointed, because it's not gonna be like that at all."

Instead, SR2—which hits the PlayStation2 and Dreamcast in March 2001—takes a few of the gameplay elements originally planned for the prequel and drops them into a time-tripping story that picks up right where that game left off. Players start the game as Raziel, with all the abilities he earned last time, including phasing, swimming, scaling walls and constricting. He wields the Soul Reaver at the game's outset, except now he doesn't need a full health coil to whip out the blade in the Material Plane. The reaver is much more crucial to the gameplay this time around—

Concept art roll call (clockwise from top): Blood Omen's Vorador returns to the spotlight; one of the new, hard-to-kill Thrall warriors; the limp-winged hero himself, Raziel; and a nightmarish demon.

While you check out SR2's screenshots (taken from the Dreamcast version) keep in mind that the finished game will look much better. The team is still stripping out all the original PlayStation code and tweaking it for the new hardware.

The Reaver Rack

They may have been sliced from the last game, but the reaver forges are back in a big way in Soul Reaver 2. These wishing-well-shaped structures come in seven elemental flavors—Dark, Spirit, Light, Fire, Air, Earth and Water—and each imbues 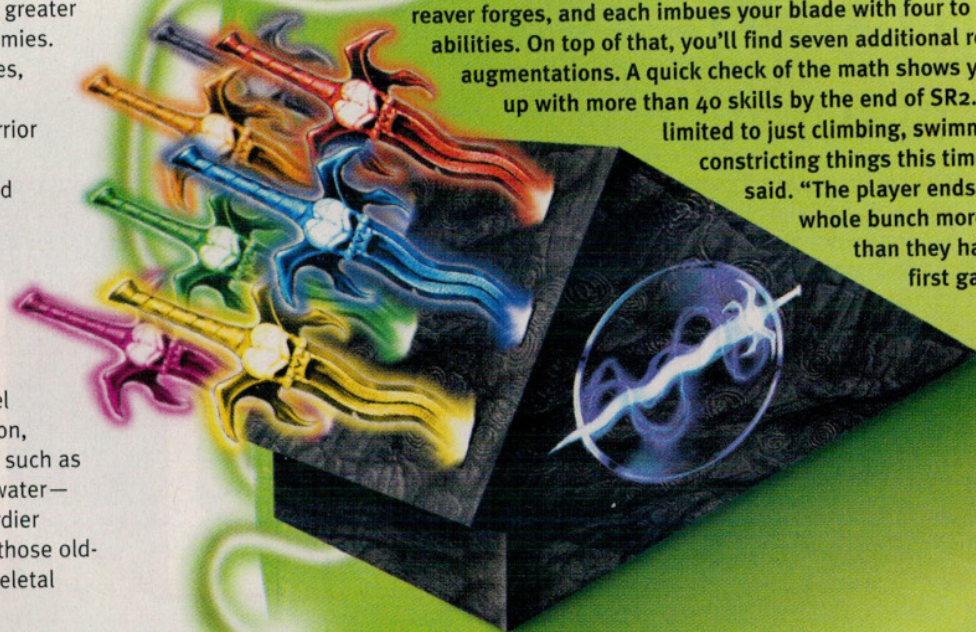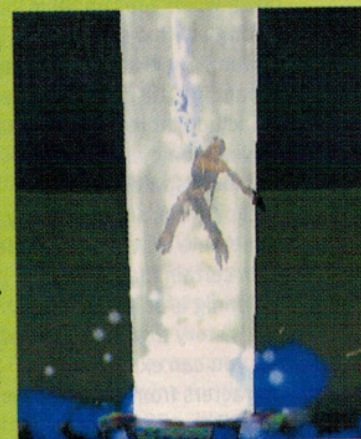Raziel's reaver with more uses than a mystical Ginsu. You'll find the forges scattered throughout the game's time zones—usually after figuring out a particular area's puzzles. Once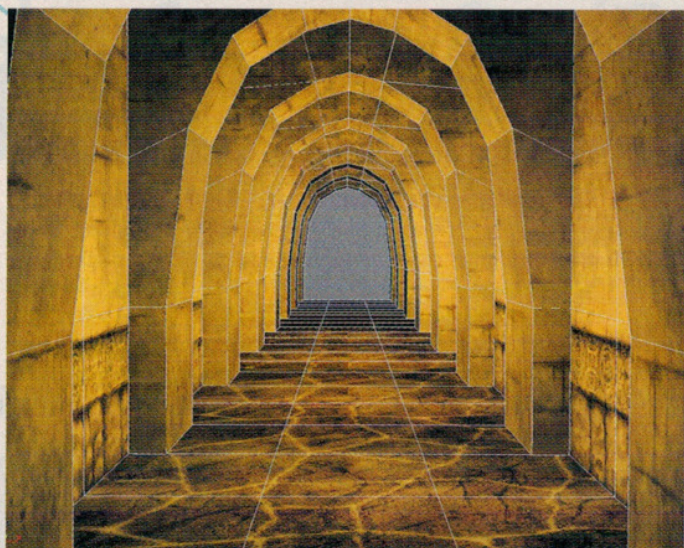 Raziel dips the Soul Reaver into these pits (a feat conveyed via a nifty in-game cinema) the blade is granted between four and six new abilities, many of which you'll need to reach new areas in the game. "We want players to have that 'ah ha!' moment every time they get the new abilities," Hennig said. "You'll say, 'Oh great—there's all these places I can go now that I couldn't go before.'"

Take the Light Reaver, for instance. It glows in the dark once equipped, and you can aim it like a flashlight to inspect murals in the gloom—and see clues you'd otherwise miss. This reaver launches projectiles that turn on lanterns, while you can also strike special elementally attuned symbols to open sealed doors and trigger other events. Reaver types you'll find later in the game bestow more dramatic abilities. You'll use the Spirit Reaver kinda like a hookshot; aim it at special distant tiles in the spectral realm and you'll teleport to that location. In addition to the reaver forges, you'll also find seven reaver augmentations that bestow special charge-up moves. Find the Fire Reaver augmentation and you can cast a ring of fire by holding the attack button. The Dark Reaver augmentation gives you temporary invisibility, the Light Reaver power-up will illuminate an entire room and blind light-sensitive enemies, etc.

OK, so Crystal Dynamics' current game plan has it that you'll find seven reaver forges, and each imbues your blade with four to six new abilities. On top of that, you'll find seven additional reaver augmentations. A quick check of the math shows you'll wind up with more than 40 skills by the end of SR2. "You're not limited to just climbing, swimming and constricting things this time," Hennig said. "The player ends up with a whole bunch more abilities than they had in the first game."

by tracking down and dipping his blade into the seven elemental reaver forges, Raziel will gain the new abilities he needs to reach every area in the game (see the Reaver Rack sidebar for more details). The Glyphs, on the other hand, have been removed from SR2 entirely. In their place are spells Raziel must find to open certain portals and figure out puzzles.

Players spend SR2 chasing Kain through three time periods: one set before Blood Omen, during the prehistory of Nosgoth; a period right around the time of that game; and a period soon after. "We're not revisiting the destroyed wasteland world of Soul Reaver in this game," Hennig told us. "We're kinda going back to say, 'Well, the wasteland is unredeemable, but what can we do about the past to change that?'" The pillar area Kain used as his headquarters in SR serves as the central hub of all three time periods, which offer new types of terrain and locations such as swamps, forests and cities (a new on-screen compass will help save you from getting lost).

According to lead animator James Guilford, SR2 will pack many new vampire types, as well as much greater variety of human NPCs and enemies. You'll encounter catlike vampires, hunters clad in stylized swash-buckling attire, the Sarafan warrior priests, vampire- and demon-worshiping sects of humans and other creatures similar to the undead minions and extra-dimensional demons that plagued Nosgoth in Blood Omen. Combat will work pretty much the same as before; Raziel needs to pummel enemy vampires into submission, then do 'em in with a fatal feat such as impaling or hurling them into water—except now he'll encounter hardier vampire types invulnerable to those old-school finishing moves. The skeletal

Then and now: Wanna know what a difference thousands and thousands of polygons can make? Take a gander at these mock-up shots of a pillar-lined hallway on the PlayStation (left) versus a hall on the Dreamcast/PS2 (right). The largest rooms in the original PS Soul Reaver were made of about 10,000 polygons. For the Dreamcast and PS2 versions, most rooms will be between 20,000 and 30,000 polys.

Thralls you face near the start of SR2, for example, don't go down when you run them through with a spear. Fortunately, the designers are expanding the combat system to include more types of fatal moves. Some enemies can only be dispatched by decapitation, some are only vulnerable to weapons made from certain materials, etc.

Hennig is still keeping SR2's story a guarded secret, but you can expect key characters from Blood Omen and SR to appear in the game. You'll see Kain and the Elder, of course, as well as Moebius, Ariel and missing-in-action SR2 lieutenant Turel. Raziel will also run into characters from Nosgoth's past, including Vorador and the Sarafan. "What we're doing is reinvesting in the mythology of the original Blood Omen, as well as how it all ties into Soul Reaver," Hennig explained. "Our last game was more peripheral for all sorts of reasons, but now we can really get in there and roll up our sleeves and get back to the mythology, and it's going to be really important for this game and future games that people get familiar with it."

Of course, you're gonna need the newest hardware to follow along. Crystal recently announced that SR2 will only be available for Dreamcast and PS2. Although the game was originally supposed to be a PS1 title, the team's now ramping up the engine to take advantage of the slicker—and, they believe, more lucrative—new machines. "The impression we're all getting is the PlayStation1 market is dying a quicker death than anybody thought," Hennig said, "and

"When we worked on the first game...it was like, OK, here are all your restrictions. Now we can do whatever we have time for."

— artist Matt Mocarski

World Builders

Research, research, research: SR2's designers and mesh artists consult architecture books for ideas, sketch out each level, then map it out in Adobe Illustrator. They walk through the level several times on paper and meet with everyone on the team for feedback. Meanwhile, the texture artists visualize and research what each area should look like. Then the meshers build the level in 3DStudio MAX, the artists add the textures and lighting and—voilá!—a world is born. "We end up with something that looks intentional," Hennig said, "as opposed to something extemporaneous, which I think a lot of games feel like."
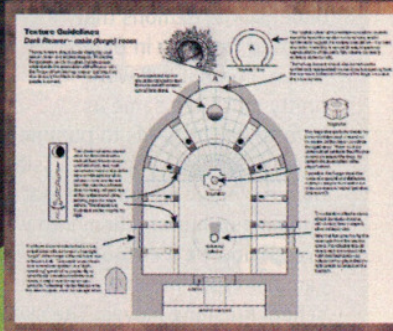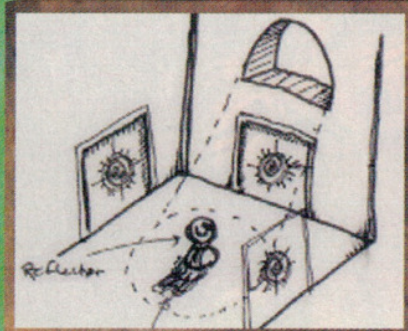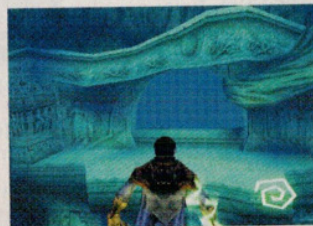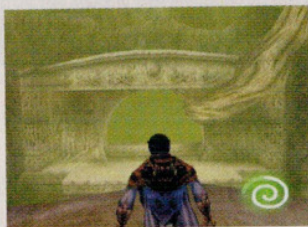
whether that has to do with the readily available CD burners and the fact that people are just renting games rather than buying them, who knows. It just doesn't seem like it would be as financially sound as we'd hoped. And obviously, for what we wanted to convey with story and architectural richness and character detail, this new hardware gives us so much more creative freedom."

Not a single member of the SR2 team regrets the decision to move on to the newer hardware. "When we were making Soul Reaver for the

'We're going to get into the PlayStation 2's vector units... We're going to push the hardware. We have a lot of experience with that."

— programmer Scott Krotz

PlayStation, it got to the point where we were afraid to add code," lead programmer Marc David told us. "We would add code to support some feature, and then we would have to spend some time removing code from other places and shrinking it. Our

memory was so tight. But now we have more memory and can push more polys. The game experience will be much richer."

"And the other really important thing is the frame-rate," chimed in programmer Jason Bell. "The PS2 and

Dreamcast versions will run at 60 frames per second. That's one of the reasons the DC version of Soul Reaver looked so much nicer than the PlayStation1 game. It played so smoothly."

Programmer Scott Krotz added, "Plus, we're going to get into the PlayStation2's vector units. We'll have anti-aliasing. We're going to push the hardware. We have a lot of experience with that."

But while the programmers tweak SR2's engine for the Dreamcast and PS2, it's ultimately up to the texture artists, animators and mesh
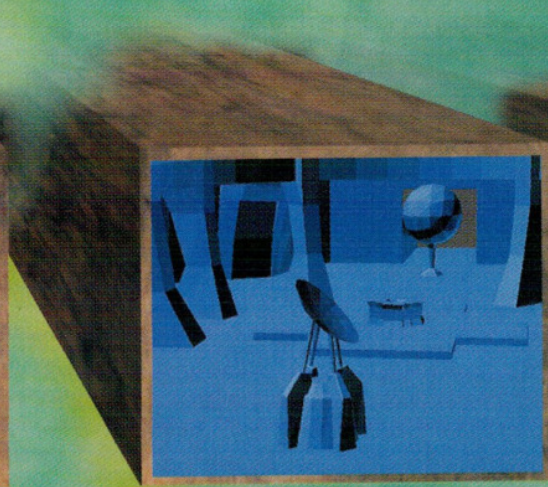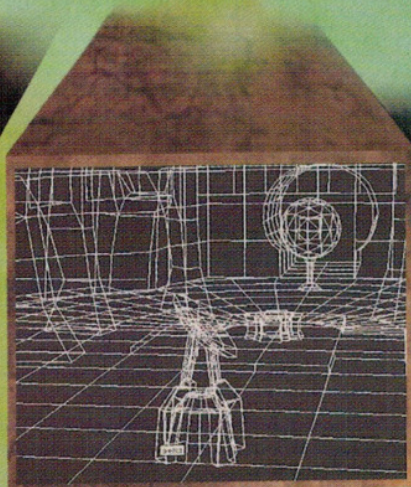
Smart Answers to Stoopid Questions

The staff at *EGM* is a nitpicky bunch, and we found a few minor head-scratching contradictions while playing through Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver. So, since we have way too much time on our hands, we thought we'd clear up four little conundrums while we had the ear of the game's director, Amy Hennig. Sorry, Amy, but we just had to ask...

EGM: Raziel's skin and jaw burn away when he's tossed into the Lake of the Dead at the beginning of Soul Reaver, so why does his hair stay intact?

AMY HENNIG: Because he'd look silly if he was bald. I dunno. It's magical hair, or maybe he just has deep follicle.

EGM: How come Raziel can stand on blocks in the Spectral Realm, but he can't pull or push them?

AH: Because if he fell through the world, that would be an A bug. (Editor's note: An "A bug" is a critical flaw that would prevent a game from shipping until it's fixed.) But the real answer is that time stops in the Spectral Plane. So he can stand on a block—it has physical presence—but he can't move or manipulate it because the Spectral Plane is timeless and changeless. That's our story, anyway, and we're sticking to it.

EGM: Why didn't Kain ever sprout wings like Raziel did? We thought those Dark God vampires followed each other's evolutionary footsteps by about a decade or so.

AH: Everyone's on a different evolutionary path, but there's something deeper going on. Without giving anything away, I'll say Kain knew exactly what he was doing when he had Raziel thrown into the vortex. Raziel's wings were a sign, and Kain had him tossed on purpose. He's not a compulsive, jealous creep. Soul Reaver 2 will reveal more of that.

EGM: Why does Raziel's cowl and boots pass to the Spectral Realm with him, but he can't carry other solid items like spears or torches from the Material World?

AH: The tattered remains of his clothing aren't literally material objects anymore; they're more like "organic" manifestations of their former states, now melded into Raziel's being just like his flesh and bones. From a philosophical point of view, Raziel doesn't really literally have a physical body anymore anyway—his appearance is just an illusion, a spiritual manifestation. Therefore all his accoutrements are just a projection of his spiritual state. Is that convoluted enough?

builders to make the game shine on the new hardware. "When we worked on the first game for the PlayStation, it was, like, OK, here are all your restrictions," texture artist Matt Mocarski told us. "Now we can do whatever we have time for." Every member of the game's art team stressed to us again and again that SR2 will look much better than the screens you see here (these shots were taken from a version the team started building back when the game was going to be a PS title). The programmers are now in the process of revamping the game engine to take advantage of the new systems' boosted horsepower. We're told to expect a 150 to 200 percent increase in detail in the final Dreamcast and PS2 versions. Monsters will be built from at least twice as many polygons as before. Raziel's character model will be beefed up by about 1,000 polys. Textures will be higher-res and in 16-Bit color. The environments will teem with ambient critters, little animals like dogs, rats, snakes and birds. And all structures in the game will look more curved, realistic and organic; pillars in the DC and PS2 version will be rendered with 18 sides, for example, while pillars in PS Soul Reaver only had six sides. Put simply, SR2's gonna give you a lot more to look at. "The first game was gothic throughout," texture artist Brian Morrisroe said. "But for this game you'll see more architectural differences." Hennig added, "Because Raziel travels between different time periods and explores areas built by different races at different periods in history, we can have a lot of architectural variety. The seven elemental reaver forges, for example, were all constructed by an ancient race of weapons

SR2 carries on the series' legacy of excellent voice acting. The same actors return, including Michael Bell (pictured) as Raziel, Simon Templeman as Kain and Tony Jay as the Elder God. Gordon Hunt and Kris Zimmerman (who was in charge of Metal Gear Solid's cast directing) return as the voice directors.
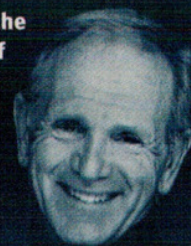
masters, but each has its own architectural style."

In the end, though, it's not SR2's visuals that the team is most proud of—it's the puzzle system. "We fell back on the block puzzles too often in Soul Reaver just because we didn't have enough tools to make more creative puzzles," Hennig explained. "But the cool thing about this game engine is it's been more and more generalized so the creative power is in the designers' and artists' hands now, as opposed to relying on the programmers. The designers can think up a puzzle and just make it, because the pieces are all there. We don't have to make special-case requests for the programmers to hardwire anything anymore." You'll find puzzles in SR2 that require a lot more exploration and attention to your surroundings. You'll need to examine murals on the walls for clues. In an early level, for example, you'll see a painting of an obelisk blocking the sun. Look nearby and you'll find an obelisk and a giant reflector, which you must rotate to catch sunlight. Pulling the obelisk in front of the reflector creates a magical shadow bridge you can traipse across to reach a new area.

The SR2 team isn't overhauling the gameplay so much as tweaking it. You can impale vampires with burned-out torches now, for example, and you get a handier sight for aiming projectiles in look-around mode.
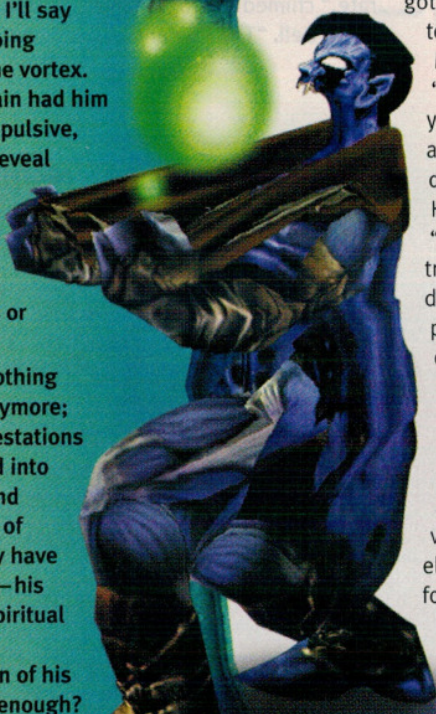
Raziel can haul around more than just spears and torches in SR2; he'll often need to carry items from one area to another, thus completing lock-and-key-type puzzles. And since Raziel can't carry physical objects in the Spectral Plane, many of these puzzles require you to invent novel ways of carrying something from point A to point B. "We want players to look around, remember stuff, think about what they're doing and deduce the relationship things have with each other rather than just plowing through the game," Hennig told us. "You're gonna have to use your brain."

Ultimately, though, SR2 is still early in development, and Hennig emphasized that some of the gameplay elements covered in this feature may be modified when the game hits next March. But Crystal still has plenty of

time. The team has already learned the hard way what happens when you try to cram too much into a single game. And they plan to make SR2 much more than just the conclusion to

> 'We want players to look around, remember stuff, think about what they're doing and deduce the relationships things have with each other..."
> — director Amy Hennig

the first game's cliffhanger. Crystal Dynamics wants Kain and Raziel's universe to fuel an ambitious franchise; this game—more so than its two prequels—will set the stage for all things to

come. "This isn't sloppy storytelling," Hennig said. "We're spending a lot of time making sure we're paying attention to the consistency, and I think fans of the series will appreciate that."

What's Next?

Just downstairs from the Soul Reaver 2 team, another cadre of coders, artists and designers—half of them veterans of the Gex and Akuji projects, the other half new to Crystal Dynamics—is working on a separate Kain PlayStation2 game not due for release until Christmas 2001. Tentatively titled Legacy of Kain: Blood Omen II, it's the direct hush-hush sequel to the 1996 PlayStation original, and it's being built from the ground up to take advantage of the PS2 hardware.

The game kicks off about 200 years after the original Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain—way before the blood-sucking star turned the world into the wasteland seen in Soul Reaver. As Kain, you spend the game prowling through Meridian, a bustling human city caught in an age of renaissance thanks to the harvesting of Glyph Magic. Gameplay is similar to Tenchu and Metal Gear Solid; you control Kain from a third-person view and must often hide in shadows, creep through alleys and leap across rooftops to hide from humans and the vampire-hunting Sarafan.

Of course, since Kain's gotta eat just like any other hard-working vampire, human contact is inevitable. "The nice thing about this game is you get to play a guy with an evil side to him," said lead designer Mike Ellis, who previously designed Colony Wars and CW: Vengeance for Psygnosis. "And every character in the game is a potential food source." Feeding time's handled just as it was in the PS original: You suck blood from victims in a flowing stream that shoots across the screen—except now the extra power of the PS2 means you'll see plasma splatter Kain's clothes. Speaking of

detail, Meridian will teem with an unwashed mass of shopkeepers, peasants, even mangy dogs and rats. Crowds will react intelligently to your actions. Folks will eye you when you pass by and call the guards if you draw a sword or perform supernatural feats. "A lot of the game evolves around how you feed on people," Ellis said. "If you discreetly pull someone into an alley and feed, you won't get caught. But if you snack on humans in the middle of the street, you'll have a lot of problems with the guards."

BO2 is broken into consecutive levels with goals rather than hubs that let you revisit areas as in SR. Kain starts with the basic vampire tricks (he can suck blood and become nearly invisible in shadows), but as he beats bosses he'll gain "Dark Glyph" skills, including super leaps and a charm trick that'll

have weak-willed humans doing his bidding.

BO2 is the first of several planned spinoffs that will take the Kain mythology in new directions. Many of the characters covered in SR2 will be further developed in this game. "It's kind of like the *Star Trek* TV spinoffs," executive producer Andrew Bennett told us. "*Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine* have their own characters, themes and settings, but they're set in the same universe. We want the Blood Omen and Soul Reaver fans to really feel as though they're playing characters in a totally consistent world."